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Amsterdam; Session: "From custom to profession. The professionalization of agriculture
in the 19th and 20th centuries," Saturday, March 25, 8:30 AM.

Modelling the farm-family 1953-1970

Dr. Erwin H. Karel

Introduction

The title of my contribution to this session is: Modelling the farm-family 1953-1970. I will try to answer the following question: *how and why the tried Dutch government to influence the life and behavior of farm-families during the fifties and sixties of the past century.*

Farm-families is one of the major themes of my thesis published in 2005, which describes the agricultural policy of the Dutch government in the two decades after the second world war.¹ Actually it concentrates on the so called rural development program: an advisory program that tried to modernize traditional farmers in backward agricultural areas.

New agriculture policy

There were several reasons why the Dutch government in the early fifties got convinced that structural changes in the agricultural business were necessary. The most important was the loss of competitive power in the international market. The Dutch agriculture policy was focused on rebuilding the country. Low prices at the consumer market would keep wages low and consequently could improve the export. Farmers were compensated for selling their products at lower prices than they could get at the international market. But at the same time this didn't stimulate them in trying to reduce their cost of production. When the international market was fully restored in the early fifties and prices of agricultural products began to sink, many Dutch farmers had to high costs of production. The Dutch government had to change its policy. In stead of subsidizing the agriculture products, it tried to improve the conditions of production for farmers.

¹ Erwin H. Karel, *De maakbare boer. Streekverbetering als instrument van het Nederlandse landbouwbeleid 1953-1970* (Groningen, 2005)

In 1954 a new Land Consolidation Act passed the Parliament.² This act didn't only prescribe the reallocation of land, but also stimulated the building of new roads, dikes and other infrastructure. All these measures would in the end lower the cost of productions for farmers.

There was involved a great amount of tax money in these projects. The Dutch ministry of Agriculture feared that in some rural backward regions the inhabitants would not accept the modernization and that the high investment would be unprofitable. That is why the ministry approved the start of a rural area development program in order to integrate farmers and their families in modern society.



The map shows the rural development areas 1956-1970. The thickness of the point gives an indication of the range of the project.

² A fellow research on this item was published by: Simon van den Bergh, *Verdeeld land. De geschiedenis van de ruilverkaveling in Nederland vanuit een lokaal perspectief, 1895-1985* (Groningen/Wageningen 2004)

The scientific-ideological foundation of the program was made by the Department of Sociology of the Wageningen Agriculture University. The execution of the program was organized by the Information Service of the ministry of Agriculture.

The map (page 2) shows that most projects were in the eastern and southern parts of the Netherlands. This is actually where a great number of small farmers could be found. In the period 1956 until 1970 35 percent of the Dutch farmers and their families were involved in one of the rural area development projects. This indicates that it was a rather important program that affected a great part of the rural population.

Advisory

The rural area development program included three forms of advisory work. The agricultural technical advice was orientated at the technical and economical aspects of farming. It learned the farmer about all kinds of modern production techniques and ways of financing his farm. The agricultural housekeeping advice was meant for the farmer's wife. It taught a modern and efficient way of housekeeping in order to save time, which could be used for farming work. The agricultural-social advice introduced the farmer's family in developments of the modern Dutch society. An important item was the careers guidance for children who had to be talked into leaving the agriculture sector for good. The rural area development program, which was preceded by some experimental projects, started in 1956 and was concluded in 1970.

The agricultural advice was mainly technical, but was certainly based on what you can call farming strategies. In order to make farms more profitable, farmers were pushed in certain directions. Extension of their farm was one of these directions. After the second world war most experts presumed that a farm of 5 hectare (12,5 acre) was enough to gain a reasonable income for a farming family. In 1955 this was 7 hectare (17,5 acre), in 1960 about 12 hectare (30 acre) and by the end of the sixties 20 hectare (50 acre). Nowadays this is at least 60 hectare (150 acre).

Those farmers who couldn't extend their farms had to intensify their production, for example to improve the quality of their grasslands. Several other strategies were possible to raise the output, like the transition from arable farming to horticulture/market gardening. Especially in areas nearby urbanized areas, this could be very profitable.

Very often farmers chooses to reduce the number of activities. Many traditional farms had a few cows, some pigs, kept chickens, produced crops for the market and for their cattle. They were able to invest more money in one very profitable activity when they reduced their activities. In the end this resulted in highly specialized farms.

E.W. Hofstee

So the technical advisory resulted in new often more specialized forms of agriculture. But besides the technical, the social advisory work was equally important. Not only the farmer but in the option of the policymakers the whole farm-family had to be modernized. In this part of the advisory work, the Dutch sociologist played a decisive role. Especially the rural sociologist E.W. Hofstee. He worked at the Wageningen Agricultural University. He develop a theory called the modern dynamic culture pattern. Hofstee presumed that western society was in an transition stage from traditional towards industrial modern. On the hand there where villages and farmers who lived and worked in an old fashioned way, while on the other hand progressive farmers already developed very modern on industrial examples based methods. This type of sociological thinking, namely the opposition between traditional and modern was not new. Actually the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies described at the end of the nineteenth century the distinction between what he called *Gemeinschaft* und *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* symbolized the old agrarian society, with rather closed villages with their own set of conventions and with great importance for family relations.³ On the other hand there was the society were institutions and formal rules dictated life and where individualism prevailed.

Tönnies regretted the lost of the *Gemeinschaft*. In that aspect Hofstee differed total from his famous German predecessor. Hofstee was a modernist. He belonged to the group of scientist, politicians and policymakers that after the second world were tremendous optimistic about the ability to build a new and planned society. In the eyes of Hofstee the traditional farmer simply had to become a modern farmer, no discussion was possible about that.

In the early sixties Hofstee described in an article the modern farmer.

³ F. Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie* (Berlin 1912); Original publication: F. Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirischer Culturformen* (Leipzig 1887).

‘He is not an unpleasant man; generally spoken he full fills the demands we pose to our fellow citizens nowadays. He is a man who tries to maximize the production at his farm and who, under the same conditions as the traditional farmers, is able to produce far more. As a farmer he is proud of his work and works he often even with more pleasure than the traditional farmer, because he can see the results of his additional efforts. But the existence as a farmer is for him, in contradiction to the traditional farmer, not self-evident. If he would not see any prosperous future for his son in the agricultural business, then he would be perfectly satisfied if his son would choose another job. He is a man who, not like the traditional farmer, is limited in his interest. He does not restrict himself to the small group of people he meets everyday. He is interested in the world and knows what is going on. He leads an active life and always formulates his point of view. Generally spoken he is interested in politics. He is active member of the church and not passive like most of traditional farmers. He is highly interested in education and advisory and follows with great interest the progression from his children at school. He is active in club’s and associations, including agriculture cooperative societies, and he is relatively often member of a board. Even though his economic performance is high, he is able to create much more leisure than his traditional colleague. He goes far more often on a field trip, has more regularly an holiday and receives guest at his home. He will always have an open mind for changes.’⁴

Farmers family

Not only the farmer needed an open mind for changes. His family as well had to accept the modern life. One of the main questions for Hofstee and the group of sociologists around him, was how to bring the farmers family from a traditional culture pattern into a modern one.

In the typical Dutch circumstances they were unable to formulate an answer to that question, or more precisely to develop a practical way, without considering the position of the church. In the Netherlands during the period 1920 until 1970 society was divided

⁴ E.W. Hofstee, ‘Veranderend Platteland’, *Landbouwkundig Tijdschrift. Maandblad van het Koninklijk Genootschap voor Landbouwwetenschap. Orgaan van het Nederlands Instituut van Landbouwkundig Ingenieurs* 74 (1962) 671-690, aldaar 679.

along vertical lines. The political and religious elites of Catholics, protestants, liberals and social-democrats organized their own groups in all kinds of political and social activities. This created sharp dividing lines. Contacts between the different groups were rare. In consequence mutual interference was not done. Especially religious leaders did not accept intervention from the state in for example family life.

Changing family life became thus a task for the three farmer unions, namely a catholic, a protestant and a neutral. But the conditions (financing the information officers) were created by the ministry of Agriculture. This is a somewhat double position. The government (state) as a whole (i.e. the Catholics, protestants, social-democrats and liberals) stimulated the modernization of the farm-family. On the other hand the practical execution of the program was left to the farmer unions. The advisory program could differ from region to region. For example: people in the northern part of the countries, except for some religious groups, stood more open for advisory, then the catholic groups in the south. In the province of Limburg information officers visited the local priest before planning their courses.⁵

Even though there were differences, one is able to describe some general lines. First there was a distinction between the housekeeping and agricultural-social advisory work. But both forms overlapped.

In order to give an impression of the housekeeping, I made a scheme of the work of one of the information officers. Actually many of them were related to the so-called Home Economics.

⁵ Erwin H. Karel, (published in autumn 2006)

<i>Courses</i>	
Gardening	
Flower arrangement	22
Beter bewegen	27
Cooking course for country girls	18
<i>Conversation evening</i>	10
<i>Lectures</i>	
Home furnishing	22
Cheese cookery for young girls	22
What is housekeeping advisory in the rural development program	18
<i>Excursions</i>	
Home exhibition	10
Excursion to the Noordoostpolder	10
Exchange with Beesd	20
One week with youth to Denmark	18
<i>Visitors</i>	
School for social works	22
German farmers and their families	52
Chairmen of new rural area development projects	35
Farmer women from Rouveen	21
Extension society from Zuidhorn	19
Group from Havelte	26
<i>Competition</i>	
For young girls: making menu's	17
<i>Exhibitions</i>	
New equipment for housekeeping	234
<i>Individual advisory</i>	
Freezer, home furnishing, food, garden	105

List of work of an information officer in the village of Borger 1960.

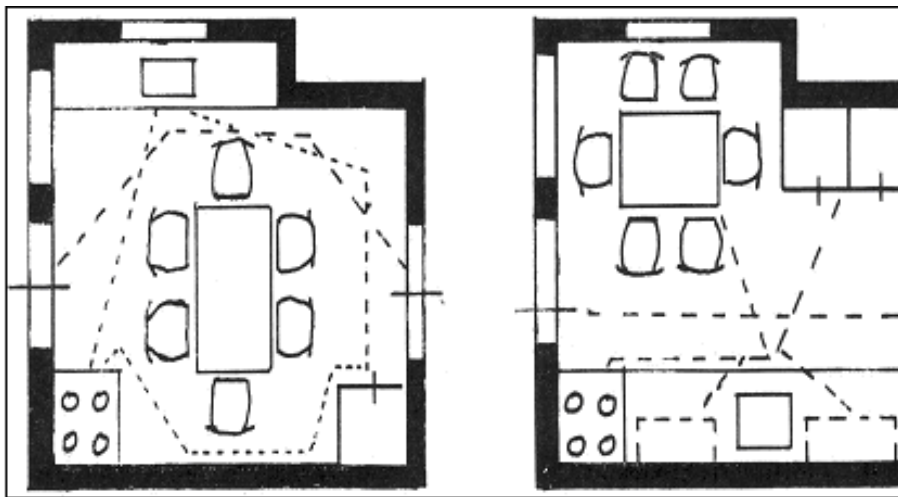
The modern western family was used as an example. Not necessarily in its demographic pattern, because in religious birth control was not discussable, but certainly in its (waarden en normen). In 1960 the ministry of Agriculture put in its annual report a photograph of a family that represents the modern western family. Remarkably enough at the wall of the living room there was a crucifix. Clearly the message was that even for the religious part of the nation turning into an modern family was a goal. The bourgeois values and standards became something to aim for the backward farmer families.

They had to turn their traditional strategy in which the oldest son was predestined to run the family farm, into a strategy which maximize the profit of the farm, in other words: the entrepreneurship became the highest value.

The housekeeping advisory directed its work on themes like: efficient working, improving home furnishing, family life and managing housekeeping money.

Efficiency in working could be improved by modern housekeeping equipment, like a washing machine, freezers and so on. But there were also other methods like furnishing the home such a way that a housewife could efficiently do her work.

For example a kitchen was restyled to decrease the time a housewife had to move from one point to another.



Sketch for housewives to restyle kitchen

However much of the advisory work was on this kind of problems, I have to conclude that the effectiveness of the work was lying somewhere else, namely the advisory on financial matters. This is the case with the housekeeping advisory work as well as the agriculture-social work, although the last was primarily occupied with career guidance

Financial management

The management of financial matters played an very important role in the agriculture-social advisory work. Questions were raised like: how much allowance the children should get, what kind of wages should be paid to the children that worked at the farm and how should the inheritance be divided among the children. The relations in a farmer's family were in many aspects more complex than in the modern western family. The division of the inheritance had to be in such a way that one of the children could continue the farm business. The other children had to be compensated for example in the form of following higher education. That is why an important aspect of the agricultural-social advisory work was the career guidance. Sons and daughters of farmers were stimulated to find outside the agricultural business a job. The government discouraged that children continued hanging around the family farm, because the presence of too many working hands encouraged the use of inefficient labour methods. Besides the so called 'generation-pressure' (the relative number of children that wish to succeed their father) had to be reduced in order to make enlargement of farms possible. In general this 'generation-pressure' was among small farmers less problematic than among farmers with medium-sized and larger farms. Sons of small-farmers apparently understood at an early stage that the agricultural business offered no perspective to them. The advisory work in the rural development areas had some influence on their choice to leave the agriculture sector, but it is also clear that this was a general national trend.

Looking back, I can conclude that modernising the family in the first place meant a (verzakelijking) of family relations. Secondly this was accompanied with a (propageren) of (warden en normen) of the modern western family life, (met inachtneming van) religious feelings.

Was the rural development program effective?

One can this questions not answer with just a yes or no. Certainly it prevented most backward areas from falling further behind. The information officers succeeded in keeping these areas in touch with the national developments.

But is also unquestionable that the ideas that originated the program triggered far more consequences than originally initiated. At the end of the sixties until today specialisation and enlargement of production at farms hasn't stopped. The reduction of labour craft and the (kapitaalsintensivering) have changed the agricultural business in a radical way.

Nowadays one can hardly image how a farmer and his family could gain an income from just the few acres and cows they had in the fifties. These tremendous changes didn't lead to a disappearance of the family farm. On the contrary. In the Netherlands more than 90 percent of the farms are run as a family business.

It's no longer (vanzelfsprekend) that the oldest son succeeds his parents. Many farmers sell their farms at the end of their working lifetime. So one can conclude that influencing the culture pattern of the traditional farm families has succeeded. In my opinion this was possible because many parts of the housekeeping and agrarian-social advisory work were (verzakelijkt). In the southern catholic parts of the Netherlands this form of advisory work was only accepted after the church succeeded in (afschermen) the private sphere of families.

One of the major paradoxes in the modernization hypothesis was that on the one hand it emphasized economic aims, but on the other hand tried to reach them via manipulation of the social-cultural lifestyle of the farmer and his family. In the end it resulted in an economized way of thinking about the farmer. This did not mean that the farmer interpreted his existence as purely economic. Social status still affected his choices. Here it is important to observe that the state gained influence on the farmer by economizing his existence. The Wageningen sociologists did not foresee this effect of their hypothesis.

Even though most farmer families do not differ very much in their culture pattern from the modern western or bourgeois family, they still got their own characteristics.